Announcements

SERMON
AUGUST 19, 1973
1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13

How else to begin except by saying we have looked forward to this hour for 12 weeks: so much that we are here a week early. One of the notorious falts of preachers is that we invest too much significance in every word we say from the pulpit. So - I worried a great deal about what I might say on my first Sunday back. Somehow, I wanted to convey to you how much it means simply to be here - doing the work that for me is life itself: back among the people I have come to trust and love; moderating a Session of honest, committed Christians; singing the great hymns of the Church with an organist who knows how they were meant to be played; listening toa choir that obv iously loves its role in the service and consistantly brings a caliber of music to the congregation that exceeds the expectation of far larger and wealthier churches: working with a secretary and treasurer and D.C.E, who together give their special gifts to the rest of us in a way they would be embarrassed to claim - but which makes this congregation very unique.

I'm glad to be back - and it needs saying before I go on to anything else. What has transpired in my life in three months time cannot be ignored either. I don't propose to do a travelogue this morning and yet it would seem artificial to simply take up where I left off last May as if nothing had happened. Every Sunday morning in Scotland I would muse to myself about the possib ility of American tourists traveling through Kinlochleven and stopping at the Church to hear some Church of Scotland preaching: and then settling back in the pew to be greeted by my combination Pennsylvania/Hoosier twang. The same dillema presents itself this morning to any who may be visiting and looking for a typical sermon - or to members who haven't been here since May - or to members who didn't even know I was gone. In any case - if you fall in one of those categories I apologize to you, because you're going to hear a little bit about Scotland: and at the end some personal reflections that might, if your definition is flexible - be called a sermon.

I wanted to go to Scotland for years: ever since I learned that my family came to this country from there: my desire was heightened as I began to learn the important role Scotland played in the Reformation and that Presbyterianism was born there under the guiding hand of John Knox. I wanted to go because the political philosophy of this country - individual liberty and representation government - first stirred the hearts of

English speaking men in the centuries of conflict between the fiercely independent Scots and the English Crown. I wanted to go because there is so much history in the very soil of Great Britain. I wanted to taste it and feel it and live it - from inside as a part of the Church of Scotland. I wanted to see the sights and more than that - to know the people

Our expectations were fulfilled. And we are convinced that this summer will continue to be one of the most significant experiences in our lives and the lives of our children.

Scotland is not far: we did not experience the kind of cultural shock associated with moving from American to the Far East, for example. We are related to Great Britain - historically, ligustically, philosophically and theologically. It's not appropriate to generalize - but the typical British attitude toward America can be compared to an older brother watching a younger brother - already stronger, already the toughest kid on the block - go through the pain of adolescence. It's a kind of patronizing patience over our interantional and internal problsms, combined with an admiration for our strength and wealth.

There are difference, of course. Scotland - the same size as Indiana, is a state of mind. Along with Wales, Northern Ireland and England it is part of the United Kingdom - with a monarch, a common tradition and political authority lodged in Parliament. But there is a fierce pride and identity in Scotland, particularyly in the Highlands, that remains Scottish and that clings desparately to the traditions of the past. In 1745 the last major rebellion took place, and while that ended in defeat, the Scots still regard their nation as a distinct place - and if not a sovereign state - at least a proud and sovereign state of mind.

The geography of the Highalnds is breathtaking. The mountains are unlike anything I've ever seen: dark, still, rough, brooding mountains that rise from sea level: uninhabitable except for sheep and the very hearty. Shorn of top soil and trees, rocky - magnificient and inspiring. They sing Psalm 121 ("I to the hills lift up mine eyes") and you do.

Kinlochleven sits at the head of Lock Leven, surrounded on three sides by mountains. Until 1900 there was no way to get there except by boat up the Loch. But in 1906 British Aluminum located a foundry there which dominates the village - and which produces its own

hydro electric power from a resevoir up in the hills. There are 1,500 people almost all related in one way or another to the factory. During the war there were 1,000 employees: today there are 300 - thus the majority of the villagers are retired aluminum workers, or their widows, passing their days tending to the most exquisite rose gardens I've ever seen.

Down the road is Glen Coe - where the Campbells massacured the entire Clan MacDonald in the 17th Century - a narrow Glen where we spent much time walking and looking. Up the road is Fort William, established by the Crown in the 18th Century to control the Highlands-a goal that was never realized: now a busy tourist town of 4,000.

We found the people friendly but quite reserved. They treated us kindly and politely as soon as we got off the plane. But it was different and we weren't sure at first if we were, in fact, welcomed and accepted. I approached my first Sunday in the pulpit with great fear and trembling: and afterward - the congregation filed out in silence. As they passed the door they said ("Good Morning, Mr. Buchanan") that's all. No more than three said, ("welcome - We're glad you're here"). After the evening service they said ("Good night, Mr. Buchanan") in a way that caused me to expect a delegation of Elders to call and suggest that we might pack up and leave. It took two weeks to understand that you don't engage in small talk with the minister after the service: that my sermons were being received with enthusiasm and a growing curosity. And by the time we left they had told us in many eloquent ways that they were as sorry to see us go, as we were to leave them. Throughout it all I kept thinking that David Black must be literally overwhelmed by what happens here normally after each service.

The Church itself has been in Kinlochleven for a long time: the current building was erected in 1930. It is plain, sparse but adequate. There are no crosses on it or in it - to assure that no one might confuse it with a Roman Catholic Church. And while the animosity is long gone, the tradition remains. There are 250 communicant members - and yet because it is a Parish Church - the concept of "belonging to it" is not nearly as important as to them as it is to us. There were 4 other churches in town, none with a resident clergymen - and village was the Parish. The minister, simply as a matter of course, was expected to meet the pastoral needs of the people.

The Church of Scotland is Presbyterian and so the similarities were obvious. But there were many differences. The service of worship was slow and diliberate: intentionally non liturgical - they don't like responsive readings or unison prayers - to the point that the Lord's Prayer is said only at Communion. And yet, while the thought of a bulletin, or a liturgy was obnoxious, they expected the same thing to happen at 10:30 every Sunday. It was unthinkable that they might begin with a hymn instead of a Psalm: and I had a little difficulty convincing the organist that the roof wouldn't fall in if we sang four hymns instead of five. The effect of it is that people come to hear a sermon: preaching is where it's at: and while I'm comfortable with that as a preacher, I felt that people had not worshipped in the sense of investing themselves in a corporate act which drew them in personally.

That tradition is expressed in the custom each week of an Elder bringing the Bible to the pulpit as the service begins, opening it and then returning to allow the minister to enter the sanctuary.

Church life is radically different. It consists of two services on Sunday, a loose Sunday School and a Bible Study on Wednesday night. When I told them what happens in this building in a typical week, they wre amazed. The expectation level for the professional ministry was, therefore, quite different. The minister is expected to preach twice a week call on the sick, conduct funerals, and weddings and that's all. If anything else needs doing the Elders handle it. CHurch administration, program development were alien concepts. There was no office, no study in the house, no secretary, and no mimeograph - that item which for Presbyterians ranks directly beneath the communion chalice. So I read everything in sight, and spent a lot of time talking with people and concluded that if I were there permanently and entertaining notions of maintaining my marriage I would either need a tent in the back yard or an 8 hour a day job at the Aluminum factory.

We traveled - about 3,500 miles, mostly one day trips - seven of us in a 5 passengar car with no mishaps except recurring car sickness. We loved every minute of it. Sue, Diane, Susan and I had 9 days in England, 5 in London and 4 on the road. We saw what we wanted to see and what every tourist sees: Big Ben, The Tower, 10 Downing Street: The

Changing of the Guard: Bath, Stonehenge, Stratford on Avon, Coventry, Canterbury, Dover Windsor. Four days were spent in Edinburgh - a lovely, fascinating city - and one in Sterling - where 140 determined Scots held off the entire army of England from their castle high on a rock - 120,000 of them. Sue and I flew to Ireland to see where her grandparents were born, baptized and farmed. We stayed on the farm - with her relatives - and had an experience that will be unforgetable.

I could go on indefinitely. We feel that we have learned and grown more than we could have in any other way. We are grateful to God, to you - and to our new friends in Scotland for the experience. And we are grateful to be home - safely. Wee Brian expressed it for all of us- He had slept in nine different beds and been in and out of more homes that he can comprehend. Home - had ceased to have meaning for him. But as we rounded the corner of our subdivision he perked up and something began to fall into place and when our house came into view he chuckled and laughed spontaneously - beautifully. He was home and he knew it.

My hope is that all the parties in the exchange have benefited from the experience. As I heard of the way David Black was received here - and as I experienced what it feels like to be a minister in the Church of Scotland, I knew that he was being given a whole new vision; and that he was helped to see the church as a fellowship of caring, helping people in a new way. Your grace made me proud - and I want to thank everyone of you who entertained the Blacks, who made them feel at home here, and extended your lives into theirs. I want to thank those of you who took time to write to us while we were away. News was always gladly welcomed and the arrival of the post man was anxiously awainted.

I will be a long time reflecting on the meaning of my experience. I expect it will continue to teach me and to provoke myintellect. By way of thinking about it theologically, it has already confirmed for me the idea of oneness in Christ. On a personal level I experienced that oneness as I was received by a congregation of total strangers, and as our common faith in Jesus Christ allowed strong bonds of trust and friendship to develop in a relatively brief period of time.

In our New Testament Lesson this morning Paul was talking to the people of Corinth about their unity in Christ in spite of the fact that each individual was different and

unique. I think that's important. In Scotland I found a different theology. In the congregation I found a small group of people who are so enthusiastic about their particular theological stance that anyone who differs is relegated to the category of second class Christian. It's the same dynamic that operates here - between denominations, and in congregations between people of different theological persuasions.

The story is told of a little boy who carried a pail of water to his father while they were vacationing at the sea shore saying "Daddy, here is the ocean". Semantically, the little fellow was correct. But actually, there was a lot more to the ocean than he was able to carry in his little bucket. So it is with Christian faith. We all have our little buckets - our little container of eternal truth. But there's more out there than any of us can comprehend - and it is a serious sin of arrogance and self righteousness to assume that I know the mind of God and you don't. Nicholas Berdyeav has ob served that: "People manage to deduce from Christianity the most disgusting morality that has ever been known, the morality of heavenly egotism. 'The good' are so anxious to get into the kingdom of Heav en that, in the crush at the entrance, they are ready to trample on a great number of the neighbors and push them down to hell... This is the worst defeat that Christianity has suffered in human hearts". (~~P.20 A Search for Christian Identity - Plumb~~)

We are one in the Church of Jesus Christ. Our oneness is expressed in our common humanity - and that in turn is expressed in our shared faith and hopes - our dreams and hurts and fears. Scottish people cry when someone dies. They fear the same thing. They hope for the same thing. And the Church stands with them - that is, we all stand with them because we are one in Jesus Christ.

I was in Kinlochleven just a week when I had my first funeral. I called in the home b efore and went to see the widow, Mrs. MacRae, afterward. She was a warm, courageous lady and we fell in love with her. She babysat for the children and gradullay began to share with us what her life was like. One day she told us about a Highland Custom called Clooty Dumpling: boiled for three hours in a pillow slip, made only on birthdays and other special occasions - and deep inside buried a thrupenney bit (a three pence piece). We were entranced and asked her all the questions we could think of. On the night before we left Mrs. MacRae knocked on the door and handed us a Clotty Dumpling - and our own three

pence piece - to bring home. We hugged and she left with tears all around. We are one in the grace of Jesus Christ - and Mrs. MacRae knew that and expressed it more eloquently than all the theology in the world.

Paul went on to suggest to the Corinthian people that love is the most excellent way of all. And my reflections on my experience are that that idea is profoundly true.

Being away allowed me to look at my country and my church through a different set of spectacles, as it were. I could see Watergate and Cambodia in a new light. I could see the turmoil and upheaval in the United Presbyterian Church from a distance - and therefore, I think with a little more clarity. And I am more convinced than ever that what the church has - and all the church has - is the Good News that God is love: that God loves us - that in loving each other we are experiencing the richest dimensions of human life: and that his love for us is eternal.

That was what I said in my last sermon in Scotland. And it is what I want to say to you as plainly as I can as we begin to worship and work together again.

Paul said it best:

"Neither life nor death...nor anything else in creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Take everything else away - all the ecclesiastical trimmings, all our fancy theology.. our building, programs, even our precious arguments about who is right and who is wrong .. and all we have left is all we ever had in the beginning.. a Lord who died that we might live: a Lord who suffered that we might see how greatly we are loved: a Lord who, by dying, forever defeated the power of death...

"See from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down.
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small.
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all." AMEN